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Statement submitted by Equality Now, Feminist Majority Foundation, Girls Learn International, Inc (GLI), Human Rights Watch, Let's Breakthrough Inc., National Organization for Women (NOW), Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association, Salvation Army, The Unchained At Last Inc, Women's Federation for World Peace International, and Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Child marriage is a significant, widespread problem in the United States, a human-rights abuse that primarily affects girls, with devastating consequences. In its foreign policy, the United States. considers marriage before 18 to be a human-rights abuse and pushes to stop it and to protect those affected by it. However, in its domestic policy, the United States has failed to take simple, basic steps to end child marriage or to create social protection systems for child-marriage survivors.

The minimum marriage age in most of the United States is 18, but exceptions in 48 of 50 states allow those younger than 18 to marry. Laws in 18 states do not specify any minimum age for marriage.

Typical exceptions to the minimum marriage age in United States are parental "consent" and judicial approval. However, both of those exceptions are exceptionally dangerous to children.

When a child in the United States is forced to wed, the perpetrators are very often her/his parents or guardians. Thus, parental "consent" — which typically involves nothing more than parents' signatures on a marriage license application — often is actually parental "coercion."

When a child is forced marry, that child is often forced to lie to the judge about it. Thus, the judicial-review process puts children in a horrific conundrum, forced to choose between telling the court about their plight and facing terrifying repercussions from their parents, or lying to the court and forever feeling somehow complicit in their own forced marriage and the rape and abuse that go along with it.

Laws in eight states in the United States, allow a pregnancy exception to the minimum marriage age. Such exceptions have been used to cover up rape and to force girls to marry their rapist, as happened to Sherry Johnson of Florida, who was forced at age 11 to marry the 20-year-old member of her church who had raped and impregnated her.

Further, research in the United States shows teenage mothers who marry are likely to divorce and then more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teenage mothers who stay single (Vivian Hamilton, The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Recognition of Adolescent Marriage, William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository, 2012). The same research showed 70 to 80 per cent of marriages before 18 ends in failure.

In the United States, marriage ages are set by each state government, not the federal government. But the federal government, too, is failing to protect girls from child marriage. Currently, the United States federal government does not set a minimum age to petition for a foreign spouse or fiancé(e). Some girls in the United States as young as 15 have been forced to marry adult men overseas and then forced to petition for their new fiancé or husband.

Child marriage has catastrophic, long-lasting effects on a girl, undermining her health, education and economic opportunities while increasing her risk of experiencing violence. Consider:

- Children are nearly powerless to protect themselves from forced marriage. Before they become legal adults — which, in most U.S. states, happens at age 18 — children can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage. They face overwhelming legall and practical barriers if they try to leave home, access a shelter, retain an attorney or bring a legal action. Indeed, in many United States states, children are allowed to marry but not allowed to file for divorce in their own name.

- Women in the United States who married at 18 or younger face a 23 percent higher risk of heart diabetes, cancer and stroke than do women who married between ages 19 and 25 (Matthew Dupre, Sarah Meadows, Disaggregating the Effects of Marital Trajectories on Health, Journal of Family Issues, 1 May 2007). Women who married before 18 also are at increased risk of developing various psychiatric disorders (Yann Le Strat, Caroline Dubertret, Bernard Le Foll, Child Marriage in the United States and Its Association with Mental Health in Women, Pediatrics: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, 24 August 2011).

- American girls and women who marry before 19 are 50 percent more likely than their unmarried peers to drop out of high school, and four times less likely to graduate from college (Gordon Dahl, Early Teen Marriage and Future Poverty, The National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2005).

- A girl in the United States who marries young is 31 percent more likely to live in poverty when she is older (ibid.).

- Globally, women who married before 18 are three times more likely to have been beaten by their spouses than women who married at 21 or older (World Policy Analysis Center, Fact Sheet, March 2015).

Due to the lax laws and lack of social protections, between 2000 and 2010, an estimated 248,000 children, some as young as 12, were married in the United States. A large majority of them were girls wed to adult men.

The United States can easily solve this problem. The federal government can set 18 as the minimum age to petition for a foreign spouse, and state governments can eliminate the exceptions that allow marriage before 18. However, the federal government has not yet acted. And, while two states in the United States recently passed bills eliminating marriage before 18, many state legislators in the United States remain resistant to ending child marriage. In state after state, legislation has been defeated or, in some cases, passed only after legislators added exceptions that still allow for child marriage.

Additionally, the United States still refuses to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, both which acknowledge the dangers of child marriage.

So this human-rights abuse remains legal in the United States and continues to disproportionately impact girls, with devastating consequences.

Meanwhile, the United States State Department has pressed other countries to stop child marriage. The State Department in 2016 identified ending child marriage abroad as a key strategy toward empowering adolescent girls and declared child marriage a "human rights abuse" that "produces devastating repercussions for a girl's life, effectively ending her childhood" by forcing her "into adulthood and motherhood before she is physically and mentally mature." The United States government allocates approximately USD11 million per year toward addressing child marriage overseas — both ending the practice and helping survivors — while failing to address the same problem at home.

We, the undersigned, call on the international community to send a strong message to the United States, as the United States has sent to the international community: It's time to create social protections and pass laws to end the human-rights abuse that is child marriage. Everywhere.